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ABSTRACT

A survey examined the perceived roles and competencies of school personnel and parents involved in the transition planning process for special education students, and compared these perceptions in rural and nonrural areas. The study took place in two parts: first, a field study validated the questions in the survey instrument; second, the survey instrument was administered to 112 parents and education professionals in rural and nonrural Texas school districts. Examination of the perceptions of parents and professionals regarding their responsibilities during the transition process found that role confusion existed, thus hindering effective transition planning. No differences were found between rural and nonrural districts for perceptions of transition responsibilities or for extent of transition training provided to personnel. Although parents were highly aware of their responsibilities, education professionals had a different view of what those parental responsibilities were. Only administrators reported that they were adequately trained to fulfill their role in the transition process. Implications for delivery of transition services are discussed. Contains 18 references. (CDS)

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PERCEIVED ROLES AND COMPETENCIES INVOLVED IN THE TRANSITION PLANNING PROCESS - A COMPARISON OF RURAL AND NON-RURAL AREAS

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The coordination of school based transition services for students in special education requires the participation of a diverse group of people in order to bring about a successful post-school adjustment for the student. Inadequate planning and follow-up training can have a drastic impact on the individual. Coelho (1998) reported that only 26% of working age people with severe disabilities are employed. This contrasts with the overall 82% employment rate for the general population.

Statement of Problem

While mandates may outline the services that must be provided in the transition process, they do not define how the services should be provided and who should provide them. This results in many different interpretations and confusion in assignment of tasks to responsible parties. Therefore the major problem lies in a duplication of tasks by some members of the transition planning team, or in many cases, a tendency for some tasks to "fall through the cracks", thus resulting in an incomplete planning and training process for the transitioning student.

Barriers to Successful Transition:

Gallivan-Fenlon (1994) reported major traits that inhibit successful transition from school to adult life. Among them were differing future expectations for young adults with disabilities; a lack of transition related knowledge; hastily and poorly coordinated transition planning; and low levels of family participation. There are several reasons for poor transition planning. First, many of the responsible parties (parents, school personnel, outside agencies, and students) are not sure of their role in transition planning. Secondly, they are unaware of what information to provide (or be provided) Finally, once the plan is written, few guidelines exist for implementation and follow-up.

METHOD

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in perceptions of the roles and levels of competency of the parties concerned in the transition process, and to compare those perceptions between rural and non-rural communities. This investigation was conducted in two parts. First, a field study was conducted to validate the questions contained in the survey instrument. Second, the survey instrument was administered to a selective sample of participants.

Instrumentation

The original survey instrument was developed by Baer, Simmons, Flexer and Izzo (1993), in Ohio. The original survey instrument was modified to correspond to Texas roles and responsibilities. A model developed by Roessler (1996), came closest to achieving that requirement. The position titles were then slightly modified to encompass both rural and non-rural school districts in Texas and to facilitate ease of classification. The instrument was then converted to double Likert format by adding the question pertaining to perceived competence. Open-ended questions were added to provide additional information on the relationship between the parties' global perceptions of their responsibilities and competencies and perceptions concerning those responsibilities and competencies when faced with specific tasks. The final instrument consisted of 40 questions. A double Likert format was designed to elicit responses for each

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item. The first Likert scale measured, the participant's perceived measure of responsibility, e.g., "I am primarily responsible for" (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = No opinion or not sure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The second scale measured, the participant's perceived level of competency, as reflected by training, e.g., "I am adequately trained for" (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = No opinion or not sure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Design and Analysis

The study was cross-sectional survey research (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993) using a mixed design based on a general linear model. The independent variables were positions (parents, teachers, vocational personnel, administrators, and other); and districts (rural and non-rural school districts), the dependent variables were the perceptions of responsibility and perceptions of competence. Within and between groups scores were used to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 by conducting two 4x2 ANOVAS. The first ANOVA analyzed the difference between rural and non-rural school districts when compared with the perceived responsibilities of the subjects (Hypothesis 1), and for comparing roles/responsibilities with the role/responsibility perceptions (Hypothesis 3). Hypothesis 2 was tested by ANOVA by analyzing the difference between rural and non-rural districts when compared with the perceived competence of the subjects. Hypothesis 4 was tested by conducting a bivariate correlation which compared grouping of subjective question responses with the associated dependent variables.

RESULTS

Sample profile

A total of 112 subjects participated in this study. The perceptions of the parents and education professionals were measured on an instrument designed to assess roles and competencies as reflected by training. The 112 participants completed a survey describing their demographic characteristics, perceptions of their responsibilities, and perceptions of their competence for those responsibilities. In order to determine common interactions between select variables and characteristics, the data were crosstabulated in a series of two-way tables. The data revealed several observations of interest.

Observations were made regarding the age of the participants by position. The results indicated that approximately 14.6% of the professionals were under the age of 30. If one were to make the assumption that these professionals graduated at an average age of 22, then only 14.6% were in a preservice program after the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990). This could be a possible insight as to why so few professionals report having received transition training (Spruill & Cohen, 1991).

Observations regarding the gender and ethnicity of the professionals were also of interest. According to the demographic reports, the professionals were 73% female and 65% were of Anglo-American ethnicity. The majority of special education students are male. The Region 2 area is predominately Hispanic. These figures raise questions for possible future study as to the compatibility of transition training in cross cultural situations.

Multivariate and bivariate analyses were then used to address the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 stated that there will be no significant difference between the mean scores indicating perceived responsibilities of parties involved in transition planning between rural and non-rural districts. Analysis of variance was conducted to test the hypothesis of perceived roles between rural and non-rural participants.The results were not significant at ($p > .05$). Based on the insignificant results from the Analysis of Variance on Hypothesis 1, the null hypothesis was accepted.

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Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 stated that there will be no significant difference in the mean scores indicating perceived competence, as reflected by training, of parties involved in transition planning between rural and non-rural school districts. Analysis of variance was used to test the hypothesis of perceived competence between rural and non-rural school districts.The results were not significant ($p > .05$). Based on the nonsignificant results from the Analysis of Variance on Hypothesis 2, the null hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 stated there will be no significant difference between parties' mean scores of perceived responsibilities between positions. Analysis of variance was used to test the hypothesis of perceived responsibilities among positions.The results were significant, $F(4,108) = 11.676$, $p = .01$, a Tukey Post Hoc analysis was conducted to confirm the significance at Parent Responsibility Index and between the Parent position and the remaining positions (Teacher, Vocational, Administrator). The remaining variables were nonsignificant in the post hoc analysis at ($p > .05$). Based on the significant results from the Analysis of Variance on Hypothesis 3 , the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4 stated that will be no significant relationship between the parties' overall perceptions and their perceptions when faced with specific tasks. Pearson R Bivariate Correlation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis for a relationship between overall perceptions and the perceptions indicated on specific tasks. The results were significant, -.608, .016, $P < .05$. The significance was found at Administrator SPOC and Administrator Competence. Based upon the significant results from one test of hypothesis 4, the null hypothesis was rejected.

DISCUSSION

Perception of Responsibilities as reported by Parents and Professionals in Rural and Non-Rural Districts.

The first research question (Hypothesis 1) was to determine if there was a difference between the perceptions of the parents and professionals in rural and non-rural school districts as to their responsibilities under the transition process. Researchers have reported great variation at the local level related to the duties and perceptions that encompass the transition process (West, Taymans, Corbey & Dodge, 1994). Further, researchers have observed that smaller Local Education Agencies (LEAs) were less likely to provide vocational education and that most comprehensive programs were less likely to be in a rural setting (Fairweather, 1989). Therefore, this study attempted to use perceived responsibilities of various parties involved in the transition process and compare rural and non-rural settings. The use of the same instrument for both rural and non-rural participants was intended to confirm or rebut the prior research results. The investigation and analysis of Research Question 1 revealed that role confusion existed, thus hindering effective transition planning and training. However, there were no significant differences to indicate that perceptions of transition responsibilities differed between rural and non-rural districts.

Perceptions of Competency reflected by training as reported by Parents and Professionals.

The second research question (Hypothesis 2) attempted to determine if there was a difference between the perceptions of the parents and professionals in rural and non-rural school districts as to their competencies as reflected by training under the transition process. Researchers have observed transition training to be lacking in many cases for both parents and professionals (Spruill & Cohen, 1991; Gallivan & Fenlon, 1991; Bull, Montgomery & Beard, 1994; Schriner, Bellini & Williams, 1995). This became evident in the acceptance of null Hypothesis 2.While these observations were confirmed, the problem of inadequate training appears to be a universal one.

Perceived Responsibilities of Parents and Professionals

The third research question (Hypothesis 3) was to determine if there was a significant difference between parties' perceived responsibilities among positions. The research literature indicated differing opinions among transition team members as to their specific responsibilities (Campbell & Essex, 1994; Roessler,1996) indicated role determination as one of the primary barriers facing teams. Baer, Simmons , Flexer and Izzo (1993) delineated the responsibilities attributable to each party in the transition process. It was this model that became the basis for the survey used in this study. The examination of these roles indicated a significant difference existed among the parties as to their perceptions of the parents' responsibility in the transition process. This difference suggested that parents were highly aware of their responsibilities, however the education professionals had a different viewpoint of what those parents' responsibilities were.

Relationship of Global Perceptions with Perceptions when Faced with Specific Tasks.

The fourth research question (Hypothesis 4) examined the relationship between answers to subjective questions pertaining to parties' responsibilities and competencies and the responses given to the survey tasks. The instrument included two subjective questions which queried the respondents on their responsibilities in the transition planning process and their opinion as to whether they felt adequately trained to fulfill those responsibilities. The first test entered the SPOR scores with the criterion variables of the Responsibility Index. The analysis revealed no significant relationship. The second analysis which compared the SPOC scores with the criterion variables of the competency index, resulted in a significant difference. This significance was found between Administrator SPOC and Administrator Competence. While a relationship was established, further analysis was required to determine the value of such a relationship. The individual responses comparing the Subjective and Task referenced sections of the instrument by position. The relationship for the administrator is an inverse one, that is, there was disagreement between the subjective responses and the grand means of the competency index. This disagreement indicated that only 60% felt they were competent subjectively while 82% responded high average to high range on the competency index. Thus, most administrators indicated they were competent when answering the subjective question while the competency index indicated they were more highly qualified than their original perception. Finally, it should be noted that even though there was no significant difference between rural and non-rural in perceived competencies as reflected by training. The perceived shortcomings become apparent when analyzing responses.

CONCLUSIONS

This study attained three specific goals. First, it broadened the research base of special education as associated with perceptions of parents and professionals in the transition process. Second, it compared those perceptions between rural and non-rural communities. Third, it provided an awareness for both parents and professionals of the tasks inherent in the transition process, thus fostering dialogue to enhance collaborative efforts in planning, training, and implementation.

The first research question (Hypothesis 1) stated that there was no significant difference in the mean scores indicating perceived responsibilities of parties involved in transition planning between rural and non-rural school districts. The acceptance of Hypothesis 1 indicated that while different personnel may be performing different tasks in rural and non-rural school districts, the structure of transition planning and training is basically the same.

The second research question (Hypothesis 2) stated there would be no significant difference in the mean scores indicating perceived competence, as reflected by training, of parties involved in transition planning between rural and non-rural school districts. The acceptance of Hypothesis 2 indicated that rural and non-rural personnel were provided approximately the same levels of training. This is surprising, since

the literature portrays non-rural districts as providing more training in transition related issues than rural districts.

The third research question (Hypothesis 3) stated there was no significant difference between parties' mean score of perceived responsibilities between positions. The acceptance of Hypothesis 3 suggested that professionals had differing opinions of parents' responsibilities than parents.

The fourth research question (Hypothesis 4) stated there would be no relationship between the parties' overall perceptions and their perceptions when faced with specific tasks. The significance was found at Administrator SPOC and Administrator Competence. These results indicated that the administrators, when faced with specific tasks on the instrument, were found to be more competent than they opined on the general question.Multivariate analysis revealed a significant difference among the various parties as to the perceived responsibility of the parent in transition planning and training. These results indicated the parents were most aware of their responsibilities in the transition process, but the other parties were unsure as to the extent of the parent's responsibilities. Bivariate analysis revealed a relationship between the administrator's perceived competence in the transition process overall and their perceptions of competence as portrayed by the tasks in the instrument. Finally, the results indicated that only administrators report that they are adequately trained to fulfill their role in the transition process. The other parties feel that increased training is necessary before they will reach a level where they are comfortable with the ability to fulfill their responsibilities to the secondary student in need of the services provided through the transition process.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings of significant differences between parties' perceptions of responsibility and significant relationships surrounding perceived competence as reflected by training, the following implications are relevant:

This study confirmed there is variation in transition services delivered at the local level as reported by West, Taymans, Corbey and Dodge, 1994. Anderson and Asselin, (1996) reported that only 61% of transition teams used predetermined procedures. This research suggests professionals are often doing more or less than what they are responsible for, thus diminishing the quality of the work. Therefore, publication of a transition guide, based on this and other similar studies, outlining the responsibilities of each member of the transition planning team would have a great impact on the effectiveness of the process and the individuals it serves.

A greater awareness on the part of professionals and legislators of the transition process would greatly enhance the process at the local level. One way to increase that awareness would be for the state education agency to apply for a State Improvement Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) to provide incentives for school districts to develop innovative transition program. For example, the Oklahoma GAINS project could serve as a model and use data from this study and others to support the application.

The results of this study and others (Alper, 1990; Reiter & Palnizky, 1996; Grigal, Test, Beattie & Wood, 1997) indicate that parent support is high and that the parent is the most consistent member of the transition planning team. Unfortunately, there are many students, whose parents do not get involved in their children's transition planning for a multitude of reasons. McNair & Rusch (1991), called for increased parent training as method of enhancing the transition experience for students. While this makes sense, one problem which remains is that we have to motivate the seemingly uninterested parent to participate in the training. This effort could be aided by an outreach program similar to "Child-Find". This "Parent-find" program would provide everything needed to bring the parent to transition training by using the more involved parents as mentors and teachers. This effort could also be supported by OSERS Parent

Outreach grant. This grant could offer stipends to mentors and to parents who would complete the training in addition to defraying costs of transportation, child-care, and training materials.

There is a great need for increased training of professionals through pre-service transition courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels and a need for increased in-service training. This is especially true for those in the vocational fields who may not have received pre-service special education training. This recommendation was indicated by the results of this study and supported in the literature (Alper, 1990; Spruill & Cohen, 1991; Schriner, Bellini, & Williams, 1995; Lehman & Roberto, 1996).

Recommendations for Future Research

The value of any research project lies in its ability to be replicated. There is a need for future studies examining the relationships described in this study. One method of widening the scope and to increase participation would be to compartmentalize the study according to the involved parties and design designated "role-unique" surveys so that participants are only answering questions which would pertain to them, thus making the survey shorter and less cumbersome to complete. This would result in greater participants and decrease the possibility of Type I error.

Additional studies including roles not covered by the Baer model (1993) are encouraged. It would be particularly noteworthy to include students, social service professionals, related service providers and paraprofessionals to examine their perceptions as to their responsibilities and competencies in the transition planning process. Finally, future studies on the prevalence of pre-service and in-service training to vocational personnel would be greatly enhanced if they include a transition component.

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